

## **twenty miles outside of the place that you live by**

### **OfShoesAndShips**

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**Summary:**

Steve Harrington stands in the Byers' kitchen, after everything, and he thinks: Fuck. This is the man I want to be.

## 1. Chapter 1

### Author's Note:

So this fic is unfinished. I like it, and I might continue it if other people like it too, but right now this is all there is. A warning for mentions / vague depictions of panic attacks and a very vague mention of Steve's unhappy home life

I write Steve as a transmasc guy; there's not much mention of that here besides a slight hint.

Nancy and Mike have already gone home, no doubt to three week's grounding and complete, accusatory, silence. Both of them giving the same awkward hugs as they talked about leaving, the same anxious running of a hand through the front fall of their hair. Steve hadn't been able to quite look Nancy in the eye, though he'd tried.

Mrs Byers has just gone with Will to drive Max home; the sedative had already worn off Billy by the time they all got back, and his car had been long gone. He'd said he'd be fine driving Lucas and Dustin home but Lucas's face had started to bruise up and Chief Hopper had insisted he ought to do it, just in case.

Steve pulls the teatowel off his shoulder where it had once again migrated and starts to dry the plates out of the sink. A few days worth of dishes, not unwashed out of habit, he realises now, but merely out of the rush of these few days. It's not much but it keeps him something like stable, in the tearful hole he's caught in after the adrenaline drained off. He's trembling a little, keeps blinking fast little blinks. Somewhere in the house a door closes and Steve jumps.

"Steve?" Jonathan's voice, a little thin like it is when he's worried.

"Kitchen," he shouts.

He pauses in drying so that he can focus on hearing Jonathan approach, so he doesn't get startled again.

Jonathan walks in, his shoes squeaking a little, and for a second they meet each other's eyes. The harsh light exaggerates how hollow Jonathan looks, how wide and worried his eyes are. It shows up a furious blush high on his cheeks and Steve breaks eye contact. Jonathan's got changed, and his hair's damp though the water heater's been the blink all night. He's in slightly scruffy plaid pyjama trousers and a long-sleeved t-shirt, holding a cream sweater in his hands.

"You didn't have to do that," he says, jerking his chin at the sink.

Steve shrugs, opens his mouth to say something and closes it again.

Jonathan pulls the sweater over his head and steps closer, not into Steve's space but close by him, and starts to tidy away the dry dishes. He moves jerkily at first, marionette-like as if he's anxious or maybe cold, but gradually his movements smooth out and for a scant few minutes they're easy around each other but Steve runs out of dishes and then they stand there at a loss.

"I should go," Steve says.

"Do you want to stay?" Jonathan says, at the same time, then: "Oh. I guess your parents-"

"On vacation."

"Right."

"But your mom, and Will-"

"Right."

"Yeah."

"Yeah."

Still Steve stands there by the sink, not moving, and Jonathan beside him. He's staring at the counter when Steve sneaks a look, but he must feel Steve's eyes on him because he glances up and they look at each other for a long, still moment. Steve blinks and pulls himself away, carefully folding the teatowel and putting it down on the counter.

He hears Jonathan sigh and the softness of the sound makes him clench his eyes shut against another wave of adrenaline-induced emotion.

He clenches his fists in his shirt and then moves, turns his back on Jonathan and walks out of the kitchen to the front door.

"Don't go," Jonathan says, and when Steve looks back he's leaning heavily in the kitchen doorway and staring at his feet. The kitchen light halos him, catching in his hair and casting his face in strange shadows.

"What?" Steve stops, his hand in mid air reaching for the bolt on the front door. He drops his hand and turns to see Jonathan better, sees

the tired earnest expression in his eyes when he glances up.

"It's late. You-," he stops, starts again. "You shouldn't drive."

What he should do is protest, open the door, walk out, go home. But Steve thinks, barely even letting himself hear the thought, that if he leaves now he's going to step back, step back in time almost; he'll lose this, like he did in the year since last time. He'll bury himself again and he'll lose this sense of place, of belonging.

"Yeah," he says, instead, and turns away from the door, back to Jonathan.

Jonathan smiles, quick and small, half there, his hands sliding into his pockets and his elbows held straight.

"I have some spare pyjamas?"

"Uh, okay," he smiles, trying to be reassuring. Whatever this is, whatever he's refusing to walk away from, he needs to start it off right. Even if right is temporarily stealing Jonathan Byers' pyjamas.

Jonathan's smile gets a little stronger, and then he turns and goes into his room; he leaves the door open, and Steve glances in as he passes on the way to the bathroom.

He tries the hot tap and it splutters, air in the pipes, so he runs the cold and splashes water on his face, bracing himself on the edge of the sink and just standing there. He runs one wet hand through his hair just as he hears Jonathan's footsteps.

He pushes himself off the sink, though still holding onto it, and Jonathan steps over the threshold, hands him a small pile of clothes.

“Want me to shut the door?” he asks, and Steve stiffens a fraction.

But Jonathan’s expression doesn’t change, not wary or mocking or even off, so Steve nods and Jonathan backs away, closes the door.

There’s a pair of thin, soft trousers, a t-shirt with a slightly sketchy, worn profile of David Bowie. Steve traces the design with his fingertips, feeling the faint rippling of fabric paint. He made it himself, he thinks, feeling a faint, fond rush. A year ago, or just a little more, he’d be laughing at this. Now he just wants to wear it, wants to feel close and safe. Jonathan’s brought him underwear, too, some thick knitted socks and a soft blue sweater. He pulls his shirt off with his t-shirt and starts shivering in the few seconds it takes to unfold the Bowie shirt and pull it over his head.

It’s soft and warm, a little big on him; for a second he feels uncomfortable, awkward, but when he catches himself in the mirror he just looks like he always does, if messy and tired. The t-shirt falls indiscriminately past the sharp angle of his waist, and gently he presses his hands against it to make sure of how much the t-shirt hides. He nods to himself in the mirror and pulls the sweater on, relaxing in the knowledge that he’s going to be okay, here, like this. He changes into the clean underwear and trousers, pulling the t-shirt and sweater down over the top. Jonathan’s lankier than he is, longer in the chest, so the sweater hangs ridiculously low over his thighs – but it’s a comfortable kind of ridiculous. He runs a hand through his falling hair to stick it back up a little, but it flops back down into his face anyway. He tucks it back behind his ear, feeling a little like Nancy, and he laughs quietly at himself.

“Steve?”

“Yeah?” he asks, scooping up his clothes and opening the door. Jonathan is standing awkwardly a few feet away, and he steps forward quickly to take the clothes from him.

“I can make something to eat,” Jonathan says over his shoulder as he takes the clothes to the laundry basket.

Steve shrugs, then realises Jonathan can’t see him and follows him. “I don’t think-”

Jonathan drops the clothes in the basket and turns around to face him. He looks down quickly and then back up, blinking, as if he’s trying to take in the sight of Steve in his clothes.

“Me neither,” he says, as he reaches out a little and then drops his hand, “But I can make cocoa, if you want?”

Steve laughs to himself, but Jonathan’s expression starts to close off and Steve stops him with a hand on his arm.

“I’d like that,” he says, and Jonathan looks straight at him.

It’s a stronger gaze than he expected, when it’s solid like this – almost challenging, rather than the soft, skittish looks he’s used to from him.

“No-one’s offered me cocoa before,” he says in explanation, “Not – not anyone like you.”

Jonathan pulls away and steps around him, heading to the kitchen.

“What, you’re too cool for cocoa?”

Steve does laugh properly then, but there’s an edge of hysteria to it that makes Jonathan look at him again, makes his expression soften. He smiles, one of those careful smiles that look almost insincere but aren’t, not quite shy but unsure. Steve smiles back, and follows him

to the kitchen. He sits at the table while Jonathan makes the cocoa the old-fashioned way, heating milk in a heavy battered pan on the stove and whisking in huge spoonfuls of powder from a fat, taped-up tub.

Steve rubs his hands across his face, feeling exhaustion suddenly fall over him as everything began to slow. Jonathan is moving comfortably again, smooth and easy along old rhythms. Steve pictures Will and Mrs Byers sitting at the table too, Will drawing and Mrs Byers laughing at something gently sarcastic that Jonathan had said, and a little cold longing curls like vines around his spine.

“Your mom’s been gone a long time,” he says, as if he’s trying to put a deadline on this, a time for when the world intrudes again and he can retreat into the safety of being the Steve Harrington that barely gives Jonathan Byers the time of day.

“She’s probably taken Will to the twenty-four hour place,” Jonathan says, pouring the cocoa into two large mugs, “He hasn’t been eating much, so-”

“Yeah,” Steve says, imagining it; red plastic tables, fluorescent lighting, scratched plates. He gets the image of Will ordering everything on the menu and he smiles a little as Jonathan puts one of the mugs down in front of him.

“Thanks,” he says, smiling stronger, and Jonathan sits down opposite him.

He’s bending close over his mug, closing his eyes a little, and as Steve watches he seems to crumple. Steve says nothing, just watches; Jonathan shifts down in his chair and their feet bump for a second. Steve clenches his hands around the mug and then breathes out, relaxing his grip in time.

“Look, Jonathan-”

Jonathan looks up at him, blinks a little blearily as if Steve had woken him. “Yeah?”

“I’m sorry.”

“What?”

Steve stares down into the skinned surface of his cocoa and takes a sip. “I – this year, I wasn’t –”

Jonathan smiles. “At least you didn’t break my camera again,” he says, and Steve smiles half-heartedly at Jonathan’s lightly bitter tone.

He opens his mouth to speak again and Jonathan shakes his head. Steve looks back down at the table-top, hunching a little, and lifts the mug as if to hide behind it.

“Thanks for staying,” Jonathan mumbles, so quietly that Steve barely catches it.

“You were right, it wasn’t safe to drive.”

Jonathan shakes his head a tiny bit and then he’s hiding behind his cocoa too.

“It’s not safe to be alone, either,” he says, regretting it as soon as it was out of his mouth, but he’s spared following it up because Jonathan doesn’t look at him.

“Yeah,” he mumbles into his cocoa.

He knocks the rest of it back and stands up hurriedly, taking his mug to the sink and filling it with water. Steve finishes his own mug with the same speed but a little more care. He yawns as he stands up, and edges himself slowly toward the living room.

“Do you have blankets for the couch, or something?”

He glances back as he speaks, sees Jonathan’s shoulders stiffen.

“I can get them-”

“I can, just tell me where-”

Jonathan turns from the sink and collects Steve’s mug, avoiding his eyes. “Closet next to the bathroom,” he says, though he sounds almost begrudging.

Steve doesn’t move for a minute, watching the way Jonathan grips the edge of the sink to hold himself up. He realises what he’s doing after a moment and moves a little too quickly across to the closet. He grabs the thickest, heaviest blankets he can find and carries them to the couch, kicking the closet door shut with his heel as he goes.

He sets them down in a heap and has just begun to fold them into some kind of order when he realises Jonathan is standing at the threshold, rubbing his elbow with his thumb. He looks over, suddenly hesitant.

“Jonathan?”

Jonathan startles, his eyes wide, and then he steps away and walks

down the little hall. Steve hears a door open and shut, and he stands frozen for just a second before finishing folding the blankets and throwing himself down on the couch.

The arm is just soft and worn enough for him not to get up again and find a cushion, and if he folds his knees right up he can manage to tuck his toes into the tiny gap between the back of the couch and the other arm. He leans up on one hand and pulls the blankets on top of him, flicking them out until his feet are properly covered and then having to tug them up again to cover his shoulder. After a few minutes wriggling and kicking he manages it, sighs, settles down to sleep and then realises the light from the standing lamp is getting in his eyes. He tries to reach the switch without moving but it's on the other side of the lamp, a good metre away. Steve sighs and rolls over instead, but that way he feels like he's about to fall on the floor and the light is still getting in his eyes, so he rolls back over, kicks his legs free and stands up. Blood rushes from his head and he wobbles, falls back and feels the couch give enough to worry him. He stands up more gingerly and looks down at the couch; it seems alright, not broken, so he goes over to the light and switches it off.

It kept a lot of darkness at bay, Steve realises, when all the night seems to crash down around him. Afterimages of the light flicker over his vision like fairy lights, blue here, red there, and he sits with a heavy thump down on the carpet, bracing himself against the table leg and resting his head in his hands as he counts down from thirty. The afterimages fade slowly as he counts, leaving nothing but the veiny redness of his own eyelids; but even that makes his breathing speed up a little so he opens his eyes and makes his slow way back to the couch. He sits more carefully this time and tucks himself back into the blankets, folding up until he feels almost foetal, almost safe. He pulls the blankets up and hides his face in the crook of his elbow, breathing artificially deep. The weather, calm enough after they closed the gate, starts to pick up again and he suddenly feels the chill as the wind fights with the tarpaulin Hopper had stapled over the broken window; the noise of it sets him on edge, the chill, the gathering pain as the painkillers wear off. He's shivering now, every movement teasing the growing aches. For a moment his breathing

goes rough, shallow, but he forces it deep again as he curls even tighter into the blankets.

He gets dizzy again and tries to breathe normally but it feels like he's forgotten how, tension and pain moving into his ribs, and he makes a rough noise of frustration through his teeth.

A floorboard creaks and he freezes.

"Steve? It's freezing, are you?"

He stops suddenly but his voice is steady, soft and shy but even, and Steve sits up less jerkily than expected. After a moment, Jonathan speaks again.

"Will's doctor calls it post-traumatic stress."

Steve just blinks at his shape in the darkness.

"Shellshock," he adds, and Steve drops his head.

Jonathan comes closer, and stands a few feet away until Steve pats the couch beside him. He sits down, and the dip between the cushions tips them into each other's shoulder. Jonathan leans his elbows on his knees, knotting his fingers together.

"Do you—" Steve starts, his voice scratchy.

"Yeah."

"Nancy, she- I don't like her to see."

Jonathan's hands tighten and Steve goes a little cold – not, though, the jealous cold he's been getting well acquainted with these few days. It's more like fear.

After a moment Jonathan relaxes, untangling his hands and bracing his hands on his knees. The movement puts his forearm close to Steve's, close enough that he can feel the whisper of Jonathan's warmth.

"She gets it too."

"Yeah."

Jonathan looks at him, then, and for a moment Steve meets his gaze.

"I have my mom and Will," he says, sounding a strange kind of thoughtful, "And Nancy has Mike."

Steve catches on and makes a strange noise, half bitter laugh and half sob; the back of Jonathan's hand rests against the side of Steve's thigh.

He rubs his hands over his face, wiping a little water from the corner of his eyes.

"I should," he says, the words dragged out of him, and he gestures to the couch.

Jonathan glances at him again, looks away. "Nancy didn't want to be alone, after she was in the Upside-Down."

Steve's breath freezes and his stomach turns over. He drops his hands from his face and digs his nails into his thighs.

"Scared of the dark, Byers?" he doesn't mean it as sharply as it comes out, means it like a joke, and for a second he's scared that Jonathan will throw him out; but Jonathan only makes the same sound that he had made, half laugh, half sob.

"Yeah."

Steve deflates and stands up, a little unsteady still. He grabs the blankets, tugging them out from under Jonathan almost, but not quite, playfully. Jonathan stands up, using Steve for balance, and when Steve looks at him again he smiles. He's close, painfully near, and for a moment Steve wants to keel over into him, to let himself be held up.

Jonathan touches Steve's elbow and he jerks a little, realises he had been about to fall against Jonathan's chest. He opens his mouth to say sorry but nothing comes out, just stands there with his mouth a little open.

Jonathan's fingers drop slowly from his elbow, tracing his forearm with the faintest touch. Steve swallows, wants to jerk his arm away and wants to press closer. Jonathan's fingers curl around his and gently he pulls Steve away from the couch, step by careful step, out of the living room and down the corridor.

"Is this where I jump?" Steve asks and Jonathan laughs, so very faintly.

The door to Jonathan's room is open, the light from a single weak lamp leaking out into the corridor. There's a narrow bed against the wall, boxed in by a dresser on one side and a bookcase on the other.

Posters on the walls, though the low light doesn't show detail. Steve still stares at them to see if he can pick out the titles but his eyes are blurry with exhaustion. His whole body, in fact, feels blurry with exhaustion, and he barely notices when Jonathan reaches behind him to shut the door and then walks him over to the bed, sits him down. He notices when Jonathan lets go of his hand and reflexively reaches out for him; Jonathan rests his hand on Steve's wrist and then lets go again, clambering into the bed behind him. Steve looks down at him after a moment, sees the way the light rests on his closed eyes, watches as the tension in his face slowly relaxes. Steve smooths the other half of the pillow and looks at Jonathan again; his eyes are still closed but he nods, the slightest fraction, and Steve lays down on top of the covers.

He stretches the blankets out over him, and then reaches out for the light.

"On or off?"

He feels Jonathan's chest move with a tiny laugh.

"Off."

## 2. Chapter 2

Steve wakes up to weak sunlight, dulled pain and near silence; he sits up in bed and looks through the window, out at the woods. It's strange to him that there's no line where the yard ends and the wood begins, that the old barn out back almost blends into the treeline.

Distantly, in another part of the house, he hears a voice. It's too muffled to make out words but it doesn't sound impatient; his father's voice would be loud and rushed against his mother's belligerent silence. He sighs a little and drags his eyes away from the window. Slowly, expecting a strong and sudden chill, he clammers out of the bed and yawns into his fist. He isn't so cold as he expected, but still chafes at his arms as he goes to the door. A dressing gown hangs on the back and he thinks about it, thinking how Jonathan might smile and shake his head. But then he remembers that Mrs Byers will be home now and thinks better of it, just opens the door and walks, a little unsure, down to the kitchen.

Mrs Byers is standing on a chair, her head and arms disappearing through a hole in the ceiling into the roofspace.

"Uh, Mrs Byers?" he says, in case she ducks back down and startles.

There's a muffled sound and then she does appear, holding onto the edge of the hatch with both hands. Her hair is covered in dust and she wipes a cobweb off her nose with her forearm.

"Steve!" she says, with none of the reticence he just now realises he was expecting; she sounds surprised but close to delighted.

"Good...good morning," he says, "Do you need a hand?"

“No, no, no,” she says, jumping a little clumsily off the chair and dusting her hands off on her shirt as she goes over to the coffee pot. She looks back at him then, smiles.

“Do you want- do you want coffee? I can make you breakfast?”

He shakes his head, rubbing his hand over his eyes and coming into the kitchen properly. As he comes closer, he sees the dark circles around her eyes, the extra edge of jitteriness to her movements.

“Have you been up all night?” he asks, before he can stop himself, “Shit – sorry- I can do it, Mrs Byers-” he shuts up before he can say anything else rude or obnoxious, before his half-asleep brain can get him kicked out.

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah,” he waves a hand, “I can manage coffee.”

She smiles at him, then looks around like she forgot what she was doing; she makes a quiet ah sound and then jumps back onto the chair and begins to rummage in the roof space again. He fills the machine while she does and it's just started to gurgle especially fiercely when he hears ah ha! and she appears holding a well-used box with christmas scrawled on the side in a handwriting he is startled to recognise as Jonathan's. She puts it down on the table with a heavy thud and starts pulling strings of lights out of it, baubles, an old clothes-peg and lace angel, a wreath of plastic holly; more things than it looks like the box ought to hold. Steve pours out the coffee into the two mugs from last night, clean now, as she smooths a kick in the angel's lace skirt with one finger. There's an open bottle of aspirin on the table and he gulps a couple tablets down while he watches.

“Did Will make that?” he asks, bringing both cups to the table.

He turns to get creamer, but she stops him with a quiet, slightly distracted “This is okay.”

Instead Steve sits at the table and she glances at him out of the corner of her eye with a small smile. “No,” she says, “This – this was Jonathan’s. Will’s is,” she rummages a moment among the baubles and holds up a large red one dangling from a string, red and papier-mâché rough, “This is Will’s.”

Steve reaches out and very gently taps the tip of his finger on the angel’s round, unfeatured clothes-pin head. It rocks a little, like those dogs on car dashboards, and Steve smiles.

“Hey,” he hears Jonathan say, and looks up to see him standing just outside the bathroom threshold, dressed in old jeans and the same sweater as last night. His hair drips into the wool sweater and his eyes have dark circles but look alive enough, “Be careful with her,” he continues, coming closer and letting his mother lean into his side a little, “She’s a museum piece.”

Mrs Byers makes an indignant noise and an exaggerated pouting face and Jonathan points to the angel. Steve laughs and pushes his cup of coffee to Jonathan before standing up and going to pour himself a fresh one.

“Is Will okay?” he asks, turning with his coffee to lean against the kitchen counter. He meets Jonathan’s eyes across the room and Jonathan smiles, looks away.

Mrs Byers nods and lets out a breath. “He said that – thing was gone, he seemed – he seemed better.”

“I looked in on him,” Jonathan adds, “He’s fast asleep.”

Mrs Byers nods again, squeezes Jonathan’s arm. “Just let him sleep,” she said, “He needs it.”

“So do you, mom,” he says, and she shrugs.

“I have to get to work soon,” she says, looking at the clock on the oven and lifting her cup of coffee to her mouth without looking. She looks to drink half of it in one mouthful and Steve hides his look of admiration in his own coffee.

“Mom-”

“I can make breakfast?” Steve says, an unthinking echo, and Jonathan looks at him with such relief that Steve has to clear his throat and hide his face with his mug again, “Pancakes okay?” he asks, and Jonathan breathes a quiet affirmation while Mrs Byers is too distracted getting back up on the chair to fit the hatch back into place.

So quickly, with Jonathan directing him from cupboard to cupboard, Steve drags up the memory of Nancy teaching him to make them one morning a few months ago when his parents were away; he stumbles through the steps repeating her instructions under his breath and beams when the first pancake starts to rise into a real shape in the pan.

This one, he catches the underside and his shoulders fall with disappointment but Jonathan appears behind him in an instant and steals it straight out of the pan.

Steve whacks his wrist with a tea-towel and Jonathan mouths ow,

exaggeratedly shakes his wrist out.

“No pancakes for thieves,” he says, pouring out another two into the pan.

Jonathan makes eyes at him and he sighs, gives in with an amused shaking of his head. He manages three whole plates unburnt, after that, not a single loss amongst them, and a quiet voice in his head decides that Jonathan must be lucky.

Mrs Byers rushes through hers, and another coffee with them, in a shivery, disjointed kind of way; one moment she’s still and smiling and gazing at Jonathan every so often as if she’s afraid he’ll disappear, and the next she’s patting her pockets to check she has her keys, making as if to push her pancakes away and run out the door.

“Are they okay?” Steve asks, still toying with his, unsettled by her jumpiness.

“Mhm,” Mrs Byers says, nodding, but in a distracted kind of way that makes Steve’s shoulders fall. It’s her nerves, he knows that, but still.

Jonathan’s foot catches his under the table and he looks over, sees Jonathan’s half-demolished stack.

“They’re great,” he says.

Steve looks down at his plate and cuts off a solid mouthful. “Course they are,” he says, “I’m a genius.”

Jonathan laughs and Mrs Byers smiles for the last time before standing up from the table. She’s left only a little, and what there is

Jonathan steals immediately; she reaches out and ruffles his hair into sharp, cartoonish spikes that fall in a moment.

Steve stares and then pulls his eyes away. For a moment he wishes he was meant to be here – that that affection was his, too – but just thinking of it makes a sick feeling skitter up his spine.

“Thank you, Steve,” she says, then turns back to Jonathan, “You’ll call me if anything happens, yeah? Anything at all?”

“Yeah,” Jonathan says, and very gently pushes her to the door, “I promise. The second he-,” Jonathan stops, and Steve follows his gaze over to the blank space where Nancy ripped the phone out of the wall, “Guess I’ll have to try and fix the phone, first.”

“I’ll drive over,” Steve says at the same time, “If there’s anything wrong.”

“And you’ll get Hopper?”

“We’ll radio him.”

She nods and breathes out, in a steady-unsteady way Steve knows from those attacks he has, over-loud mornings at home when he’s trying not to let on how scared he really is.

“It’ll be fine, Mrs Byers,” he says, and she reaches out as if to ruffle his hair but drops her hand and pats his shoulder instead.

She checks her keys again and rushes to the door. It slams closed behind her, and then through the broken window they hear her shout.

“Love you!”

“Love you too, Mom,” Jonathan shouts back without really looking up from his own second cup of coffee.

“And lock the door!”

He smiles into his coffee as they can hear her feet on the steps and then the car starting, driving off. Jonathan stands up and takes their plates to the sink. He stands there with his back to the table, just staring into space. He looks back at Steve over his shoulder and Steve sees him wince.

“Your face,” he says.

“Thanks, man.”

Steve sees the flicker of a smile as Jonathan looks away from him again, and Jonathan stands there for another moment until he seems to drag himself together. He goes across the room and opens the top cupboard, reaching up to its top shelf and coming out with a large plastic box balanced in his arms.

“Here,” he says, putting it down on the table with a bit of a thud. Steve’s head throbs, loudly enough that he groans, and Jonathan winces again as he sits down beside him.

Gently Jonathan presses the skin around the stupid kids’ bandaids that Dustin and Max had insisted on and Steve flinches, just a little. Jonathan’s fingers are cool against his skin, delicate, and even when his hand moves to explore the huge bruise blooming under his cheekbone Steve wants to press into the touch, just a little.

“Should I see the other guy?” Jonathan asks, his voice even softer than his touch. With his free hand he rummages in the box and comes out with a tube of cream.

“I’m the other guy.”

“Well,” he says, dabbing a little of the cream on Steve’s cheek, “Third time lucky, maybe.”

The cream is cold and it tingles, but the pain begins to fall away almost immediately. Steve makes a noise and Jonathan’s eyes widen; he pulls away a little and turns away to dig through the box.

“At least you didn’t nearly kill me,” Steve says.

“I wanted to,” he says, words coming out of him too fast, “If the cops—”

“I know.”

“I’m sorry.”

Steve shakes his head, but Jonathan isn’t looking at him, so he reaches out. He lays his hand on Jonathan’s shoulder and gently turns him, turns him so that his flickering gaze eventually flicks up to meet him.

“I’d still be an arsehole if you hadn’t,” he says.

“You mean you’re not now?”

Steve laughs, and as he does there’s a sound like the tearing of paper and then a stiff, antiseptic wipe presses to the cut in his lip. Steve makes a sharp noise and pulls back, but Jonathan grabs his chin and holds him still.

“Thanks,” Jonathan says, as he wipes away the built-up, scabbed blood.

“What?”

“You didn’t have to come back. You saved my life.”

*I came back for Nancy*, he thinks, but even a year ago he’d known that wasn’t quite the whole truth.

“Yeah, well. Guess I’m a hero as well as genius.”

“Guess you are.”

Jonathan looks at him then, a faint half-smile at the corner of his mouth, and Steve feels something in him drop. He swallows, drags his teeth a little at his lower lip.

“Hey,” Jonathan says, “You’ll make it bleed again.”

“Can’t undo all your hard work,” he says, and makes himself stop.

Jonathan’s smile spreads. “Yeah,” he says, sounding satisfied, and he starts to turn away.

“Jonathan,” he says, before he realises he’s going to, and Jonathan turns back.

“Yeah?”

Steve blinks at him, swallows. Jonathan shifts, just a little, curling into his space, and Steve kisses him.

He pulls back almost immediately, feeling like a kid, his face red and stumbled words filling his mouth. But Jonathan hasn't moved, not an inch, and he hasn't punched him, doesn't even look like he wants to.

"Steve," he says.

He feels frozen, hot with embarrassment, and it's only because of Jonathan being between him and the door that he hasn't fled.

"Steve."

He raises his eyes to meet Jonathan's, and when he does Jonathan lifts his hand and curls it around Steve's jaw, careful to avoid the sorest spots.